

Winter 761

Chapter 761: Raymond's Decision (2)

On this cold and unfamiliar wasteland, Raymond suddenly experienced an unprecedented illusion.

It was as if he had been stripped of all armor and clothing, standing naked in an illuminated clearing.

And deep within the mist, Louis was standing there.

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The outside world only saw the fall of Gray Rock Castle and Raymond's army suffering repeated setbacks in the Mist Swamp.

But the true support of this war lay within the Red Tide Army, the intelligence line Louis had never disclosed.

The battle of Gray Rock Castle was not won easily.

The blitz rhythm was stretched to the limit, with knights continuously fighting, their stamina and spirit rapidly depleting.

Steam war vehicles were forced to operate at high intensity amidst rainstorms and cold currents, terrain and low temperatures requiring almost half to undergo repairs.

Moreover, supply lines were stretched, repair teams rotated day and night, and though the legion appeared intact, it was approaching its carrying capacity.

If at this moment, Raymond chose to press forward regardless of the cost, the outcome would hold no suspense.

The Red Tide Army could still win, but it would be a victory not worth the cost.

A frontal crash meant a war of attrition.

It meant exchanging knights, vehicles, and time for an army that had already lost strategic value.

Even if Raymond were ultimately defeated, the Red Tide Army would gain no extra resources, population, or territory, only overdrawing its strength in the least appropriate season.

Louis would not accept such a victory.

In his judgment, the true risk was never whether Raymond could fight, but whether it was worth fighting.

Therefore, this front line was never designed for annihilation from the start.

[Daily Intelligence] was constantly refreshing.

Raymond's legion's marching routes, logistical nodes, scout deployments, and even high-level psychological changes were dissected into cold and concrete information.

Louis did not need to completely control the opponent, only some audience nodes.

When would Raymond feel that this path could no longer continue?

Before Lambert set out, Louis told him three words: "Bite him hard."

Louis did not want a decisive battle, but rather an illusion.

To make Raymond feel that the road ahead was not a path to force through but a meat grinder that had begun to operate.

Every step forward meant bleeding, yet the end was nowhere in sight.

Therefore, the Red Tide Army's actions were deliberately controlled at a vague boundary.

Guerrilla teams only struck vital points, never lingering.

Attacks always occurred where Raymond least wanted to lose, the scouts and logistical nodes.

Each precise attack was enough to spark association in any veteran.

Their dynamics were completely seen through, there were traitors among them.

Larger forces, intact heavy artillery positions, or even a battle site ready for a decisive clash awaited ahead.

Each attack added to this pressure.

If during this process, Raymond was directly worn down, causing the army to collapse amidst constant harassment, that would be the ideal result.

If not, at least push him back.

Make him account for this arithmetic.

Advancing meant a doubting army crashing against an invisible wall.

Retreating, at least, could preserve a nominal integrity.

This was the option Louis truly prepared for Raymond.

Not victory or defeat, but choice.

On this invisible frontline, the Red Tide Army never attempted to hide its purpose.

.....

In the central tent, the air seemed frozen.

The charcoal fire in the brazier was burning vigorously, yet it could not dispel the chill pressing on Duke Remont's chest.

The generals stood in the tent, no one spoke, even the faint sound of armor clashing was deliberately suppressed, leaving only the occasional crackle of the oil lamp.

When the first urgent report arrived, Raymond was still standing.

The messenger knelt on the ground, voice hoarse.

Gray Rock Castle had fallen, Kael was dead in battle.

Raymond's fingers trembled slightly.

It was a dull pain as if flesh had been forcibly gouged out.

Gray Rock Castle was more than just a fortress.

It held his family cemetery, his bloodline memories, the traces of his journey from boyhood to today.

His kin, his old troops, those he considered as fallback... all were now under Louis's control.

More crucially, the underground laboratory was completely destroyed, the collections, ledgers, alchemical materials, secrets, and wealth accumulated over three hundred years by his family, all fell into Louis's hands.

But this was only the beginning of the nightmare.

The second piece of intelligence was almost slammed onto the desk by Duke Remont.

In the southwest, the Jade Federation had completed its assembly, with a large number of mercenaries launching an attack on the southwest province.

Simultaneously, there was turmoil at the Holy Eastern Empire's border, with the Fifth Prince's banner and the Church Court's Holy Emblem raised together.

The scent of chaos had finally torn away the fig leaf completely.

Raymond did not lift his head.

His gaze fell on the map, on the provincial borders that should have been under his control.

They were being pressed, divided, and tugged by unfamiliar hands.

Then came the third piece of intelligence.

The secret agent almost crawled into the tent, wounds still bleeding.

Secret orders from the Imperial Capital.

His Majesty the Emperor, whom Raymond had placed on the throne with his own hands, to escape control, had ordered Raymond's elite garrison around the Imperial Capital to move to the southwest front line.

In name, it was to support the Empire, but in reality, it was to fill the pit.

To use Raymond's last knights to plug the gap against the Jade Federation's attack.

Upon hearing this intelligence, Raymond slowly closed his eyes; he understood everything.

This was a complete act of killing two birds with one stone.

The so-called new Emperor wanted him to be dragged to death by Louis at Gray Rock, hollow his lair out, and exhaust his Imperial Capital knights in the enemy's meat grinder.

By the time he somehow made it back to the Imperial Capital, it would have already changed hands.

His family, his bloodline, his retreats... all gone.

"Ungrateful whelp!"

Raymond's eyes flew open, the fury finally losing control, the sound like that of a wounded beast squeezed from deep in the throat.

He grabbed the document tube on the table.

It was sealed with wax, originally prepared to be tied to the leg of a Gale Bird.

Once released, the mobilization order to fully advance on Gray Rock would propagate throughout the army in the shortest time.

He could still turn back and fight Louis at all costs.

"Crack." The document tube was crushed in his hand.

The metal edge cut into his palm, the blood dripping through his fingers stained the map, coloring the spot of Gray Rock Castle.

That was his birthplace as well as the biggest failure of his life.

Raymond stared hard at that spot, eyes bloodshot, almost dripping blood.

"Louis..." his voice was low and terrifying, "you venomous snake."

Calculating the season, the terrain, his thoughts, even the foolish Prince's betrayal.

Forcing him to choose between two options.

No one dared make a sound in the tent.

Raymond's chest heaved violently a few times; he forcibly steadied his breathing.

Reason, like being pulled from torn flesh, was gradually extracted.

If he now returned to Gray Rock, what would he gain?

A looted empty city, a worn-out remnant army worn down by winter and ambush, and the simultaneous dead-end pressing from the Imperial Capital and southwest.

That wasn't revenge; that was suicide.

Raymond raised his hand and drew his sword.

A flash of cold light, a corner of the desk was sliced to the ground.

"Pass the order," his voice was hoarse yet exceptionally clear, "the entire army will turn around."

The generals' heads snapped up.

"Your Grace!" someone exclaimed, "that's our home..."

Raymond did not look at him: "The home is already gone."

When he spoke those words, his tone was frighteningly calm.

"Going back now will only throw lives away there too." He pressed his bloodstained hand onto the center of the map, "We're returning to the Imperial Capital."

Raymond's gaze lingered on the map for a moment.

Not at the Imperial Capital, but past the bloodstain on his fingertip, once again falling on the northern region already marked in red.

He said nothing more.

But in that brief silence, a resolve was driven deep into his heart.

He would undoubtedly return.

Chapter 762: Dividing the Spoils

The stench of blood in Grey Rock Castle had not yet fully dispersed.

Outside the castle, the cleanup was still ongoing.

The monsters' remains were dragged off the square; flamethrowers and high-pressure water guns were used in turn, trying to wash away the dark red meat paste clinging in the cracks between the stones.

The air was thick with the smell of blood and sulfur; when the cold wind blew, it felt like it was welling up from some deep well that had yet to be sealed.

Yet Louis still decided to hold the merit and rewards council here.

Grey Rock Castle had once been where the Remont Clan discussed military affairs and divided spoils; now it was being used again, only with a different group of people, and a different banner.

When the door of the Platinum Assembly Hall was pushed open, the warm air almost crashed into them.

The fire in the hearth burned bright, candlesticks were lined up in a row, and light flowed between the white stone pillars.

The amber-gold wine the Remont Clan had cellared for fifty years was opened bottle by bottle; the liquid poured into cups, glimmering with a gentle and tempting hue.

The family crest that had originally hung on the wall had already been taken down; in its place now flew the flag of Red Tide.

A huge parchment map was spread across the center of the long table.

The map almost covered the entire Gray Rock Province; tiny flags of different colors were densely planted on it, as if it were being carved up anew.

The Northern Lords took their seats one after another.

Their cloaks were not yet fully dry; one could still smell that lingering reek of blood.

But their gazes had long since been firmly locked onto that map.

Count Albert held his goblet, his fingers trembling slightly.

This old noble who had endured in the Northern Territory for over sixty years was now staring fixedly at the vast stretch of land encircled in red on the map, his Adam's apple rolling up and down uncontrollably.

That was the Red River Valley, one of the most fertile tracts in Gray Rock Province; its annual yield was worth three years of total output from his Northern Territory lands.

Before the council, Louis had already hinted to him in private.

The amber-gold wine in his cup swayed gently, nearly spilling.

When the allocation began, the hall fell silent.

Louis stood at one side of the long table, holding a pointer in his hand, like a perfectly sized dining knife.

He looked at the map, and at those eager, restless eyes.

"Count Albert." Louis tapped lightly on the map with the pointer. "Your cavalry charged hard; this Red River Valley fief goes to you."

After a brief pause, Albert's breathing clearly hitched; he almost stood up on instinct. His voice trembled a little, but it was firm: "I will gladly die in service to Red Tide."

Louis moved the pointer again: "Viscount Yorn, the Iron Rock Mine fief in the west is placed under your name."

Yorn almost bounced up from his chair; the goblet shook in his hand and nearly spilled.

He swallowed hard, his voice muffled yet unusually earnest: "Boss... I—I, Yorn, am with you to the end."

"Viscount Brom, the Bridgeport fief on the south bank will be taken over by you."

"Count Henderson, the Arabek fief is under your jurisdiction."

...

When the lands of the Northern Lords had been divided, the pointer paused for a moment, then dropped onto the other side.

In that row of seats, it was not nobles who sat.

They were all Knights bearing the Sun insignia, most of them men who had followed Louis ever since he first arrived in the Northern Territory.

"Lambert."

Lambert snapped his body straight, almost instinctively thrusting out his chest.

His breathing clearly quickened for a beat, but his eyes burned with a startling brightness.

"The Violet Valley fief in the northern section of Gray Rock Province, together with its attached farmlands, is temporarily placed under your custodianship."

No title, but a solid stretch of land all the same.

Lambert opened his mouth as if wanting to say something; in the end he only nodded forcefully, his throat tight.

"Remore, the Jade River fief comes under the jurisdiction of the Defense Bureau; you're in charge of the garrison."

...

The Knights whose names were called stood up one after another.

What they received was not titles, but duties, territory—promises Louis was fulfilling one by one.

Most of these men had nothing when they followed him into the Northern Territory back then.

Yet now, both in the Northern Territory and in Gray Rock Province, they already had places that belonged to them.

As for titles, those could only be granted by the Emperor.

No one at this table brought it up, because they all knew it was only a matter of time.

With each point of the pointer, a wave of barely suppressed commotion would ripple through the hall.

It was the irrepressible sound of swallowing, and the faint yet hurried clink of colliding goblets.

They all understood.

This was no symbolic reward; these were tangible lands, veins of ore, tax rights, and people.

Portions carved off on the spot from the corpse of the Remont Clan.

Louis's movements were neither hurried nor slow; he carved with precision, and in a way that convinced everyone.

When the last region had been divided up, no one in the Platinum Assembly Hall bothered to conceal their emotions any longer.

Wine was drained in a single gulp; their gazes moved back and forth between the map and Louis.

In this moment, the same sentence was carved deep into the heart of every noble and Knight seated here.

Following Louis doesn't just mean staying alive—it means striking it rich.

But everyone present knew very clearly that the biggest share of all was not on this table.

The biggest share of all was not on this table.

The core tax rights of Gray Rock Province, the port system, the final decision-making power over the main ore veins, were all still firmly in Louis's hands.

Those critical nodes that would be enough to decide the direction of the next ten years had never been put on the table for discussion from the very beginning.

Because they all understood that without Louis, even this meeting today would have been impossible.

Don't mention sweeping south and crushing the whole Gray Rock Province—just taking Gray Stone Fortress alone would have been something none of them would even dare imagine.

Wine cups were raised one after another; Count Albert was the first to stand up.

The old nobleman held his cup, back straight as a rod, a hint of relief in his eyes: "If not for you, my lord, in this lifetime I wouldn't even dare think about the gates of Grey Rock Castle."

Viscount Yorn immediately stood up after him, the chubby man's face flushed red, and he practically downed his glass in a single gulp.

"A place the Remont Clan guarded for three hundred years, overturned by you in a single campaign—on that, I, Yorn, recognize your lead."

Count Brome only raised his cup, clinked it from afar with Louis's, and drained it: "Getting this far is the biggest correct bet of my life. My thanks to Lord Louis."

"Lord Louis's favor will not be forgotten." Several Knights who had already been granted fiefs also stood up.

Lambert didn't speak; he only nodded hard, his fist clenching unconsciously at his side. The excitement of this moment was difficult to conceal.

As the wine went down, breathing quickened; someone kept lowering his head to look again and again at the markings on the map, as if confirming that those names and lands really did now belong to him.

They all understood clearly that they were watching, with their own eyes, a new order being nailed down on this table.

Louis remained where he was, expression still calm.

Only when the voices naturally subsided and everyone calmed down again did he speak once more:
"Regarding the governance of these new territories..."

He had barely begun when Count Albert was already raising his cup ahead of him. "My lord, whatever you do, don't let us manage them ourselves."

The old nobleman spoke with unusual crispness, but there was a hint of deliberate restraint in his tone. He knew perfectly well that if they really each ruled as they pleased, Louis would never approve the proposal to begin with.

"Since those bumpkins from Gray Rock Province are now under our names, the Red Tide Code must be enforced on them at once. Every day of delay is a seed of disaster."

Viscount Brome immediately picked up the thread, his expression open: "To be frank, of course we'd like to manage them ourselves."

He sighed, then bowed slightly toward Louis.

"But if I let those idiot sons of mine manage these lands, the result would be nothing but embezzlement and uprisings, and in the end you'd have to clean up the mess anyway."

My lord, please, you must send Red Tide commissioners to take charge. We take the dividends, you handle the order—each gets what they need, and we all save ourselves the headache."

Once he said this, the atmosphere in the assembly hall actually relaxed; a few nobles murmured their agreement.

It wasn't that they didn't want to hold governing power. Everyone present had, at some point, quickly weighed the possibility of managing things themselves in their hearts.

It was just that even if this thought were spoken aloud, it could never win Louis's nod.

What he wanted was stability across an entire province, not simply to swap in a new batch of Nobility to keep making the same mistakes.

Besides, managing it themselves was all toil and no credit. They'd have to maintain Knights to suppress uprisings; taxes would shrink as they were skimmed at every level, and all the curses would land squarely on their heads.

Handing it over to Red Tide, however, was an entirely different set of accounts.

The Agriculture Bureau was more professional than they were at farming; the Trade Bureau could sell the same goods at a higher price; the Defense Bureau would be responsible for public order and suppression of unrest... all the risks were clearly compartmentalized.

The ledgers were transparent, the dividends fixed, the settlements punctual.

All they had to do was wait for the results.

After these years of good faith, Red Tide's credit stood harder than gold.

Louis took all of this in, very satisfied with the Northern Lords' reactions at this moment.

His gaze briefly swept across the map, but in his mind he had already begun tallying his main gains this time.

First was territory and population.

Gray Rock Province being incorporated into the Red Tide system meant that the actual area under Red Tide Territory's control had practically doubled overnight.

More important than that was the stretch of continuous plains.

From this day on, Red Tide would no longer be constrained by the Northern Territory's bitter cold and grain imports. In his hands he now grasped one of the most stable granaries in the western Empire.

This was not just a matter of having enough to eat.

This was the foundation for whether or not he could fight a prolonged war.

Next came population.

The hundreds of thousands of farmers, craftsmen, and vagrants in Gray Rock Province would, after being digested by the Red Tide system, soon turn into labor. People would no longer be the bottleneck for Red Tide.

Then there were the seaports and trade routes.

Once Gray Rock Province's ports were plugged into the Red Tide system, products from the Northern Territory and Red Tide's industrial goods would gain a far broader dumping ground.

And the treasury left behind by the Remont Clan was the most direct fuel.

Centuries of accumulation—gold, Magic Crystals, and rare materials piled up like mountains.

This wealth was enough to support the Red Tide Legion through the next round of Magic-guided Industry upgrades: mass-producing steam war chariots, improving artillery, advancing steamships, and even reserving room for more long-term plans.

Moreover, today at dawn, the "Daily Intelligence" had already flagged more hidden resource points for him.

Unexploited hidden magic ore veins, Magical Beast nests of special value, and several underground facilities deliberately sealed off by the Remont Clan.

Developing all of these was now only a matter of time.

Last, and most important, was that Ancient Dragon corpse—heartless, yet still intact.

That was not a power that could be toyed with at will.

But Louis would not repeat the Remont Clan's mistake by using it for human experiments.

Even so, something of that nature was a priceless treasure in and of itself, and he intended to hand it over to Merian's alchemy team for development.

The gains this time were enormous.

Louis's expression remained calm, but inside, he was already giddy with delight.

Chapter 763: Emperor?

The banquet hall of the Grey Rock Castle had been thoroughly cleaned.

The blood stains that had seeped into the stone crevices were repeatedly washed away, and a thick carpet covered the entire floor, isolating the cold stone slabs below.

The towering arches were relit, the charred marks on the walls were covered by decorative drapes, and the entire hall was restored to its former luxurious state.

As if that bloody reckoning had never happened.

Musicians seated on the side of the hall played an ancient Northern tune, "The Night of Frost's Breath."

The melody was deep and restrained, like the low hum before a blizzard, slowly flowing in the warm air.

Crystal chandeliers hung above the long table, the lights refracting in the wine glasses, creating swaying reflections akin to flowing blood.

The nobility cut the steaks on their plates, their movements very light.

Occasionally, the collision of knife and fork against porcelain sounded exceptionally sharp at this moment, like a reminder of something.

They wore newly changed velvet suits, well-tailored, yet vaguely unnatural.

Their gazes briefly met across the table, then quickly shifted away.

It was a look only conspirators would have.

Not confirming positions, but confirming whether everyone was ready to take the same step.

Finally, Count Albert slowly stood up.

He picked up a silver spoon and gently tapped it against the thin crystal cup's rim: "Ding—"

The sound was crisp and short.

The cellist immediately stopped playing, and the attendants silently retreated into the shadows.

The entire banquet hall fell silent at this moment, all eyes drawn to this small sound.

Albert's gaze swept over the long table, finally landing on Louis.

"Everyone," his voice was low and hoarse, "look outside the window."

The night outside was illuminated intermittently by the castle's torches.

"The flag of Grey Rock Castle has changed color, but our hearts are still hanging."

He paused, his tone slowing even further.

"The Imperial Capital is mad, the Southeast is rotten, the Empire is half-sunken, and we stand on a piece of drift ice with gold in our hands."

No one in the banquet hall objected.

Albert turned to Louis, his gaze no longer seeing just a Lord, but more like looking at a King.

"Sir, the Northern Army's sword is too sharp, so sharp it frightens everyone, including ourselves."

His hand tightened slightly in midair.

"If this sword doesn't have a scabbard, it will eventually cut the hand wielding it. And in today's chaotic times, the only scabbard that can hold this sword..."

Albert's voice dropped to a whisper, staring directly at Louis: "is only the crown."

"Only the weight of the crown can suppress the restlessness of this chaotic world, and only the new law can transform us from divided warlords into the true cornerstone of the Empire."

Yorn, upon hearing this, began to breathe heavily.

The chubby little man had completely forgotten the table manners by now, his eyes wide and fixed firmly on the direction of the head seat.

As long as Louis nodded.

That would mean founding a nation.

He would be the minister of the new Empire, a key figure.

This thought made his fingers tremble slightly, his heart pounding painfully in his chest.

The beast-like lust for power roiled through his veins, as if at any moment he could tear out the throat of anyone standing in Louis's way.

It wasn't just Yorn.

Along both sides of the table, the gazes of all the nobles unconsciously converged.

They didn't whisper to each other, but they all awaited the same thing, this wasn't an impromptu suggestion.

This was a possibility that had been repeatedly rehearsed and calculated in private.

And it was now within reach.

Excitement slowly gathered in the air, some holding their breath, others unconsciously clenching their napkins.

Count Albert bent down slowly and maintained his posture, motionless.

This was a gamble.

He used his sixty years of reputation to force Louis to take a step forward.

He gambled on Louis' ambition.

The banquet hall was frighteningly silent.

Even the "crackling" sounds from the burning pine in the fireplace were exceptionally clear.

Everyone's gaze seemed to turn into tangible threads, one by one, wrapping around the young man at the head of the table.

Louis sat in the shadow.

The crystal chandelier's light didn't reach his face, only reflecting broken lights on the table edge and wine.

He played with that fragile crystal glass in his hand, his fingers slowly sliding along its edge.

His expression unreadable, his eyes calm as a deep, unfathomable pool of cold water.

Louis's fingers tightened slightly.

"Crack."

A subtle glass-splintering sound exploded in the deathly quiet banquet hall.

Like a clap of thunder.

He slowly raised his eyes, an ancient aura quietly emanating.

In Vico the secretary's vision, the shadow behind the head seat twisted bizarrely.

The candlelight seemed devoured and stretched by some force, and that shadow slowly rose, ultimately coalescing into a huge, blurry golden vertical pupil.

It was neither complete nor corporeal.

Yet it seemed to hang from the clouds, coldly overlooking everything in the banquet hall.

Almost the moment that aura appeared, Yorn's mind went blank.

"Thump."

The buttocks had already heavily struck the floor, the sound dull yet distinct.

He supported himself on the ground with both hands, gasping for air—this was the instinctive reaction forcibly awakened from the depths of his genes when facing a natural enemy he couldn't comprehend.

Submission.

Not a choice, but a reflex.

Count Albert's condition was much better, yet much worse.

As a knight who had stepped into the transcendent realm, he clearly felt his Fighting Energy completely suppressed in an instant.

The power system he had prided himself on all his life did not possess equal qualifications here.

His heart tightened abruptly.

Cold sweat instantly soaked through the silk shirt along his spine.

He clenched his teeth tightly to barely avoid kneeling.

When he raised his head again, there was no longer any fervor in his eyes, only deep reverence remained.

This was not a reliance on external force nor a clever Secret Technique.

This was purely a hierarchical gap.

At least a peak knight, possibly even higher.

This conclusion made Count Albert's throat tighten slightly.

Shock, joy, and undeniable fear simultaneously surged in his chest.

Shock at how deeply Louis had hidden such prowess, joy in having chosen the right team, and fear stemming from a clear fact.

Such a person, if they wished to ascend the throne, would never need anyone's permission.

The banquet hall was dead silent.

Louis received the handkerchief handed over by Weir.

The white cloth unfolded between his fingers, and he lowered his head, absent-mindedly wiping his fingers.

The wine had cooled, staining the handkerchief with a dark red color akin to blood.

His movements were slow, the golden vertical pupil still suspended in the shadow, not completely dissipated.

"Albert," Louis finally spoke, his voice not loud, yet as cold as a blade against the skin, "you've become senile."

He lifted his gaze towards the old Count who still maintained a stooped posture, his tone devoid of any jest.

Albert lowered his head further, not daring to respond.

Louis stood up, the chair legs scraping against the stone floor, producing a short sound.

In the next moment, his voice suddenly rose, overpowering the crackling of pine wood in the fireplace, carrying an unmasked anger.

"Look at those who call themselves Emperor now, oh, there's that beast Kaelin.

To climb to power, he poisoned the Regent King and cut down the Fourth Prince, slaughtering the Eight Great Clans. He sits on the chair stained with his brothers' blood, thinking he's become Emperor?"

Louis sneered coldly.

"No, he's a kindred killer beast, a rogue usurper of the Divine Artifact. Whoever acknowledges him is complicit."

His finger swiftly turned, pointing towards the Southeast.

"And then look at Lampard. This time, the tone held almost unrestrained disdain—to counter the Second Prince, he knelt to that group of zealots.

He invited the Church Court to attack, creating the so-called Holy Eastern Empire.

He's not an Emperor. He's a prostitute selling ancestral glory, a traitor inviting wolves into the house."

No one in the banquet hall dared to speak.

Louis turned around.

The flag of the Red Tide hung behind him, the red seeming to flow in the candlelight.

He spread his arms wide, as if encompassing the entire hall within his gaze.

"At this moment of ritual collapse... if I also proclaimed myself Emperor, what difference would there be between me and these two scoundrels?"

His voice lowered again, sharper than before.

"Our great His Majesty the Emperor has merely gone missing, not dead."

When this sentence fell, the air in the hall seemed utterly vacated.

"Before His Majesty returns," Louis raised a hand, pressing it firmly on the table edge, "the Empire has no Emperor."

"Whoever dares to sit up there—" he paused, "I will chop off their head."

Count Albert understood, slowly straightening up, the panic in his eyes replaced with a near-reverent submission.

Louis suddenly turned, looking towards the corner: "Vico."

Chief Secretary Vico shivered all over, instinctively clutching the parchment roll in his arms tightly.

Louis walked up to him, his finger lightly tapping the parchment twice.

"Write down what I just said, verbatim. Especially those few lines where I cursed the two false emperors." His mouth curved into a cold, meaningful arc, "Copy it to every noble in the Empire.

I want everyone to know just how foul those things sitting on the throne are."

After a brief silence.

Kneeling on the ground, Yorn suddenly raised his head, his face reddened with fervor, eyes only filled with direct passion: "Boss is right!"

He drew his sword, the blade flashing in the candlelight, inserted heavily into the floor.

"Salute the Empire's only guardian!"

This shout seemed like a fuse, the next moment all nobles rose uniformly, kneeling on one knee.

Swords were drawn, their tips touching the ground.

"Salute the Empire's guardian!"

The sound echoed in the Platinum Assembly Hall.

Everyone present was a clever person.

They were clear on what Louis was doing, also clear on what he temporarily did not wish to do.

Proclaiming oneself Emperor too quickly, with too much fanfare, would only draw all eyes, all hostility prematurely.

That crown was more a target at this moment than a reward.

As long as the phrase "Emperor has not returned" remained true, everything else had room to maneuver.

Power could come first, title could be added later.

The sword was already in hand, as for what name to call, that's a matter to discuss later.

Chapter 764: Turmoil on All Sides

The study's curtains were drawn tight, the heavy velvet shutting out the daylight outside and muffling the distant hubbub from the streets of the Imperial Capital.

Kaelin sat behind the desk, a freshly delivered parchment spread in front of him, its corners still creased.

A "Declaration to the Imperial Compatriots" based on Louis's speech.

He read it line by line, every word sharp, unreserved in its malice, like a deliberately honed blade.

"A beast who slew his kin? A despotic thief of the Divine Artifact?" At this point, the corner of Kaelin's mouth twitched slightly.

A hoarse and low chuckle forced its way out of his throat, like a delight that comes with a truth finally unearthed.

"Beast?" he murmured the word again, his fingers slowly clenching, wrinkling the parchment.

"Ha... Louis, you're spot on with the insult." His eyes were cold and clear.

Kaelin remembered how he personally crushed Rhine's throat.

Remembered the rows of hanging corpses on the Victory Avenue, remembered the warmth of the blood flowing through the cracks in the cobblestones.

He never needed a fig leaf; this Dragon Throne was built with violence and blood.

Compared to Rhine's self-proclaimed civilized hypocrisy, he preferred this bluntness.

Kaelin continued reading, and when his gaze fell on the sentence "Before His Majesty returns, the throne of the Empire is vacant," the laughter slowly ceased.

The study returned to silence.

Kaelin lifted his head, leaned back into the chair, fingers softly tapping the desktop.

This was what truly interested him.

Everyone believed that the great Emperor, his own father, would never return.

But Louis had taken over the Gray Rock Province, swallowed the Remont Clan, yet stopped short of claiming the crown, waiting instead for the Emperor who had been missing for years, clearly leaving a back door open.

Kaelin felt it was not cowardice, but restraint.

"He knows he does not yet have the capability to swallow the entire Empire; holding onto the two major provinces is his current limit."

The corner of Kaelin's mouth lifted again; this "Declaration" seemed like a curse to the surface, yet it was actually drawing lines.

The North could not press south, at least not now.

He continued reading, and upon seeing Louis use the harshest terms to condemn the Fifth Prince Lampard, labeling him a "prostitute selling the ancestors' glory," Kaelin couldn't help but snicker.

"That spineless fifth," he shook his head, full of contempt, "actually kowtowed to those God-botherers."

At this moment, he even felt a sarcastic ease.

In this letter, Louis slandered the Southeast pseudo-Emperor even harsher than himself, personally cementing him into the heretic quagmire.

The Empire's legitimate public opinion had been cleaved in two.

On one side was him, the bloodstained tyrant, on the other, a traitor bowing to external divine authority.

And the Northern Territory stood apart, coldly observing them both.

Kaelin exhaled slowly: "Interesting."

In resisting the Holy Eastern Empire, this man from the Northern Territory might even become a usable pawn.

Not a friend, but also not necessarily an enemy to vanquish immediately.

He tossed the parchment onto the desk, as if discarding a card of which he had already seen the back.

"Keep an eye on the Northern Territory," Kaelin spoke softly to the attendant in the shadows, "don't provoke him."

Then Kaelin leaned back into the chair and closed his eyes, the soldier's intuition at this moment overpowering emotion.

In his mind, a new map of the Empire slowly unfurled, not with lines on parchment, but a real outline formed by blood, supply routes, legions, and intersecting ambitions.

To the north lay Louis Calvin's direction.

The Gray Rock Province had changed hands, yet Louis had neither pushed further south nor hurried to don the crown.

Instead, he even conveyed willingness to resume some trade.

Kaelin saw it clearly, it was not weakness, it was a well-fed wolf licking its claws for the next hunt.

"Can't move," was his judgment on the north.

Remont failed to reclaim Gray Rock, and he himself had even less chance.

In that case, accept the status quo.

Let Louis become a wall in the Empire's north.

Shielding against external threats, and warding off other ambitionists.

If necessary, even have this wall bleed for the Empire, perhaps ultimately subdue him with benefits, making him a King of the Northern Territory, too, wasn't impossible.

Southeast, the Fifth Prince Lampard, and the Church Court behind him.

Kaelin opened his eyes, his gaze turning steely.

That was the true enemy that must be eradicated.

Bringing heresy into the country, using divine authority to suppress imperial authority, was a direct challenge to the Empire's legal code.

"Heresy" was a word he repeatedly savored in his mind.

The perfect target.

So long as all war aims towards the Southeast, he can, under the banner of expelling heresy, re-consolidate the nobility, establish his own unquestionable legitimacy.

Finally, there is the Imperial Capital, between him and Remont.

His gaze passed beyond the heavy curtains, towards the other side of the Imperial City.

There lies Duke Remont's manor, although Duke Remont had yet to return, quite a few knights still patrolled around it.

Once upon a time, that manor was like a mountain in the shadows, stifling him.

Imperial matters great and small, even after he made judgments, would ultimately circle back there, to be re-decided by the old Duke.

And he himself was always just a knife in the Duke's hand; Kaelin understood this well.

Chapter 765: Turmoil on All Sides (Part 2)

Now, things are different. Gray Rock Province has fallen.

The centuries-old foundation of the Raymond family has been cut out inch by inch by that cold knife from the Northern Territory.

Kaelin knew very well what that meant.

Without the wealth of Gray Rock Province, without the continuous supply of private troops, Raymond would no longer be the true controller of the Empire.

He was merely a defeated man carrying a group of remnant soldiers, fleeing back to the Imperial Capital in panic.

"Grand Marshal..." Kaelin slowly savored this title in his heart, a hint of uncontrollable violent pleasure appearing at the corner of his mouth. "Do you still have the right to treat me as a pawn now?"

The feeling was peculiar.

Louis's knife from the Northern Territory had not struck him but had precisely pierced through Raymond's toughest armor.

So, he was somewhat grateful to Louis, this wild wolf.

Kaelin slowly withdrew his gaze; he knew Raymond's nature better than anyone else. That old Duke had never been loyal.

Raymond simply chose him to be a puppet, and once the situation stabilized, Raymond would certainly act.

Replace his personal guards, or use drugs to control his will, or even fabricate an accident, then replace him with a more obedient puppet on this chair.

In the past, he was powerless to resist because Raymond possessed absolute power.

But now, the old wolf had lost its sharp claws and retreat.

Yet, a beast with no way out would become even more frantic, more eager to clutch its last chips tightly.

"So..." Kaelin muttered to himself, voice so low it was almost inaudible, "Raymond, you are my greatest enemy now."

Before breaking with the Northern Territory, before settling scores with the Fifth Prince and those fanatics.

In this cage of an Imperial Capital, he must personally devour this former benefactor.

Otherwise, the next one served on the table would be himself.

"Now, you're nothing more than an old dog that lost its kennel." Kaelin's mouth curled into a cold smile.

He would use the pretext of reclaiming the Southeast and defending the Southwest to repeatedly send Raymond's remaining loyalists into the true grinder.

Once those knights perished, once Raymond could no longer produce Gold Coins or victories, those around him would naturally start to waver.

By then, he would, in the name of the Emperor, draw in the minor nobility and lower knights who had lost faith in Raymond.

A Duke who lost his territory and purse,

What can he use to buy loyalty?

Kaelin slowly exhaled, raised the wine glass on the table, and lightly toasted the empty study.

"Thank you, Louis." His eyes shone with madness and cunning under the dim light.

"You pulled out Raymond's teeth for me. The remaining flesh, I will eat piece by piece myself."

.....

In the prayer chamber, there was almost no light.

Only a slender candlestick stood at the edge of the altar, dragon's breath incense slowly melting in the flame, releasing a sweet and heavy scent.

The candlelight flickered, casting two elongated shadows on the wall against the large Holy Emblem with the Golden Feather Flower.

The outline of the emblem twisted slightly in the light, as if a huge bird nailed to the wall, wings spread, yet ready to break at any moment.

Fifth Prince Lampard stood with his back to the door.

He was bowed, wiping a ceremonial longsword, the silvery blade flickering coldly in the candlelight.

A crumpled sheepskin parchment was slowly burning in the brazier, the flames devouring the text, turning the proclamation into ashes bit by bit.

"Duke." Lampard's voice held no emotional fluctuations. "I sometimes think, the Calvin Clan really does produce talented people."

He continued to wipe the sword, not turning around.

"Your son curses me as a prostitute in the north, while you manage the purse strings for me in the south. Are you father and son planning to eat from both sides?"

Lampard suddenly halted his movements.

He turned around, the sword tip lowering, yet a moment later it lifted slightly, pointing virtually at the ground.

His eyes locked onto the Duke's throat like a venomous snake.

"Give me a reason. A reason not to send you to the gallows. Don't tell me that you can't control him, that kind of nonsense."

In the chamber, the air solidified.

Duke Calvin stood there, he did not kneel, nor did he offer any defense.

He was silent for a moment, then spoke without mentioning Louis.

"Your Majesty." His voice was aged and calm. "The carrier pigeons from the Holy City have just arrived."

There was hardly any noticeable movement of Lampard's brow.

"I heard that the old Golden Feather Flower blooming atop the Holy Mountain..." The Duke raised his eyes to the Holy Emblem on the wall, "The petals have already withered."

The sword tip trembled slightly, Lampard's pupils shrank sharply.

He understood the meaning of the words, the old Pope was near death.

Duke Calvin stepped forward half a step, as if entering a sacred forbidden zone, yet also as if nearing the edge of the Abyss.

His voice lowered, both a prayer and a temptation: "Winter is coming, flowers fall and bloom, it is merely the course of nature. But who will the next blooming Golden Feather Flower crown upon..."

At this moment, the candle flame flickered intensely.

The Duke raised his head: "Your Majesty, my third son, Eduardo. He is currently standing on the second step of the Holy Stairs. Just one step away from that white throne representing the supreme divine power."

Upon hearing this, Lampard silently sat back onto the uncomfortable prayer chair, the backrest hard and straight, clearly not meant for prolonged rest.

He raised his hand to rub his brow, fingers pressing the temple, as if forcibly suppressing some surging emotion.

Chapter 766: Turmoil Rising (Part 3)

The secret chamber fell silent again, with the sound of the candle flame crackling ever so softly, and the scent of dragon musk growing even more intense, almost stifling.

Lampard's mind was racing, and he was calculating.

To kill Duke Calvin or to save him.

The exhilaration and shock from the former would last only a moment, whereas the latter maintained the fragile stability of the Southeast Province.

The Empire was already fragmented.

He had the powerful endorsement of the Church Court but lacked sufficient Gold Coins.

The treasury was empty, and even the knights' pay had begun to fall in arrears, with next month's wages still uncertain.

The Calvin Clan was not just a purse; it was also the reason why the old nobility of the Southeast was still willing to stand by his side.

Lampard understood this well.

His thoughts continued to spin forward—if he killed the Duke now...

Louis in the Northern Territory would have no more scruples, completely tearing away the veil of decency.

In the Imperial Capital, the Second Prince would seize the chaos and advance east without hesitation.

And in the Holy City, if Eduardo truly ascended that white throne...

As the murderer of his father, he would have no retreat.

This was a future doomed to death.

Lampard exhaled slowly, finally realizing a cruel fact.

He actually didn't have the qualifications to flip the table.

The so-called Holy Eastern Empire, seemingly grand, was actually an empty structure barely supported by three pillars...

The Royal Family lineage, the Church Court title, and the Calvin Clan.

Break any one of these, and the edifice would collapse overnight.

When he looked up again, the intent to kill in his eyes had completely faded, replaced by weariness.

"Duke," Lampard's voice lowered, "do you know why I've allowed that special bishop to meddle around in my palace all this time?"

Without waiting for an answer, he continued on his own: "Because I lack something."

He stood up and walked over to Duke Calvin.

This time, there was no threat, only a deliberately lowered posture.

"If what you said about the future is true."

"If Eduardo truly ascends that white throne." Lampard stared directly into the Duke's eyes, his tone unusually sincere, "You would help me, wouldn't you?"

Duke Calvin bowed: "Of course."

Lampard was silent for a moment, then raised his hand to point at the tightly closed door of the secret chamber.

"But for now, how do we get through this?" His voice was very low, "Bishop Salomon out there has bitten down on launching a holy war against Louis. If I don't agree, he'll question my piety.

If I do agree, it means throwing troops to the Northern Icefield for no reason, to fight your son, the Empire's protector, for the Second Prince to mock us from the Imperial Capital."

Duke Calvin didn't answer immediately.

He merely sighed lightly, as if tired of a situation he had long foreseen.

Then he looked up, his expression becoming calm and composed once more.

"Your Majesty, at times like this, there's no need for you to forcefully resist. Forcing it will only reveal your soft spot." The Duke's voice was unhurried, "We delay for time, then give him a sufficiently weighty blank check."

Lampard's eyebrows moved slightly.

The Duke continued: "To Bishop Salomon... you can make a promise. Once the Holy Eastern Empire is unified, three prosperous counties will be allocated as Church Court dioceses, under his lifelong control."

This wasn't faith, it was naked interest, enough to teach any bishop patience.

Lampard didn't immediately refute.

He knew too well what the bishop's true faith was.

The Duke's words did not stop: "As for Louis, this rebellious child, we don't need to view him as an enemy, but a necessary evil that must exist."

As this sentence fell, the candle flame gently flickered.

"Your Majesty." The Duke leaned forward slightly, his voice low, "We tell the bishop that Louis is a shield against the heretics.

Blocking the Second Prince, blocking the Barbarian Race, blocking all enemies that truly threaten the holy order. Letting him bleed instead of us aligns much more with God's will.

We not only do not crusade against him, but we also give him a chance for atonement, declaring him Guardian of the Northern Territory, letting him die for us."

The chamber fell silent again, and Lampard's breathing gradually steadied.

He had fully understood now.

This was a closed loop.

Use the bishop's greed to buy time, use Louis's sharpness to wear down the Second Prince.

While they retreat to the rear and fully campaign for Eduardo.

Lampard nodded slowly, his eyes finally shining with the light belonging truly to a ruler.

"Good, let's do as you say. I'll issue a decree, reprimand Louis for his disrespect. But for your sake, I'll allow him to earn redemption through meritorious service."

As the conversation ended, the dragon musk in the chamber had burned to its end.

Duke Calvin was preparing to leave.

"Wait." Lampard's voice rang from behind.

The Duke stopped but didn't turn around.

He knew very well that the truly important words often came in this last sentence.

Lampard neither scolded nor assumed any intimidating posture.

Instead, he came forward personally to adjust the Duke's slightly crooked bow tie.

The movement was unhurried, almost resembling a father tidying his son's appearance.

In terms of blood relations, it's intimate; between sovereign and subject, it's a binding.

Lampard's knuckles brushed against the old man's neck, feeling the layer of loose, aged skin.

He looked at the white hair at Calvin's temples, his voice sinking, carrying a sense of pressure.

Chapter 767: Turmoil on All Sides (Part 4)

"Old Calvin." He seldom addressed the other man this way, "I've staked my entire life on you and your son."

The candlelight flickered gently.

"Louis is guarding the northern gate, Eduardo is seizing power in the Holy City, while you are beside me, managing the treasury, the nobility, and those allies who might turn against us at any moment."

Lampard paused, a weary smile forming at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't let me lose. If I lose, no one on this ship will survive, nor will the Calvin Clan."

Duke Calvin's shoulders imperceptibly trembled.

He bowed deeply, with even more reverence than when he arrived.

The elderly body nearly bent ninety degrees, and then he extended his hand, executing a standard and devout hand-kissing ceremony on Lampard's hand.

"May Our Emperor's glory forever persist." His voice was hoarse, yet extraordinarily firm, "The Calvin Clan will surely present you with that Triple Crown."

As his words fell, the Duke turned and entered the deep and lengthy corridor outside the secret room.

The candlelight extinguished one by one behind him; the shadow lengthened, eventually swallowed entirely by the darkness.

Inside the secret room, only Lampard remained.

He returned to stand before the massive map again.

The Southeast territory was still small, like a piece squeezed into the corner.

But in his eyes, those boundaries had begun to move, expand, and overlap.

He seemed to already hear the bells of the Holy City ringing.

On the white throne, the new Pope donned the Triple Crown.

And, backed by that supreme divine authority, he set off from the Southeast, sweeping over the divided Empire, across the continent.

The candlelight illuminated Lampard's eyes.

There was no faith, only an emperor's ambition.

...

When the Duke returned to the study, the night was already deep.

There wasn't the ecstatic joy of victory, not even a sigh of relief.

Old Calvin almost dragged his body to the desk, sinking heavily into the chair.

This hurdle appeared to have been overcome.

But he knew better than anyone that this was merely a small nail temporarily holding up the impending collapse.

Everything hinged on a fragile assumption.

Eduardo must ascend the white throne.

As long as the bells of the Holy City do not ring in the name of Calvin, and the Pope's crown falls on another's head.

Then all the tacit agreements reached today in the prayer chamber will become waste paper overnight.

At that time, the Church Court will immediately tear off its gentle mask, Lampard will lose his divine cover, and the Holy Eastern Empire will instantly split.

Then it will no longer be a few sides vying but a true power storm that devours everything.

The desk was spread with the world map.

His gaze was fixed only on the north.

The Gray Rock Province, marked conspicuously in red, looked like a wound yet to dry.

Then he picked up the pen and wrote slowly this time.

No longer were there paternal reprimands, nor any elders' counsel.

All wording was carefully stripped of emotion, leaving only naked political judgment.

"Since you want to be a lone wolf, guard your gate well. I'll cover for you in the Church Court against the heterodox trials' pretexts. And you'll use your sword to secure a retreat for the family amidst the turmoil..."

This was a pact of equality, a cold understanding.

After writing the last word, the Duke stopped the pen and lightly tapped the desk with his fingers.

Once this letter is sent, the Calvin Clan's last shred of "father-son affection" will be completely torn away.

But this is precisely what Louis wants.

And what his father ultimately acknowledges as the right approach.

The Duke rose and went to the window.

Under the night sky, the square outside the Imperial Palace was brightly lit.

On one side was the Golden Feather Flower Holy Emblem hanging high on the city walls, symbolizing the Church Court's judgment and forgiveness.

On the other side was the Fifth Prince's royal banner, flapping briskly in the night wind.

Divine authority and royal power.

Two flags flying side by side yet wary of each other, like two unsheathed knives.

The Duke quietly watched this scene, his eyes gradually growing deep and complex.

The corner of his mouth slowly curled into a self-mocking smile.

"Gaius." His voice was light, as if speaking to the air, "Endowed with the greatest talent, bearing everyone's hope, pushed to the forefront.

But ended up severely injured in the Nest battle, rendered a vegetative state. Buried together with the era as the Emperor vanished."

The Duke closed his eyes briefly then reopened them.

His gaze shifted to a small land across the sea in the southeast corner of the map, marked with the Church Court's Golden Feather Flower.

"And Eduardo. Sent to the Church Court country early on, as an insignificant pawn."

"Yet now he's stepped onto the sacred steps, called a saint. Just one more step forward, he can wear that Triple Crown, holding divine power."

His gaze finally returned to the north.

Landed on the Gray Rock Province linked with the Northern Territory, covered in red.

"As for the eighth one... casually thrown to the Northern Territory back then, just for the Northern Territory Expansion Order. Actually raised a wolf that could truly feast on men.

Two major provinces, an iron legion. A name that needs no crown to command fear."

He let out a low chuckle, looking at those two flags outside the window, his voice subdued: "The Calvin Clan... shall never fall."

Chapter 768:

The Dawn Square was bathed in a light that did not belong to the mortal world.

It was a layer of scorching sunlight precisely filtered, forming a translucent amber radiance.

In such light, the shadows of buildings were so brief they almost disappeared.

The reliefs and murals on both sides of the street lined up neatly.

Their content was highly uniform: re-enactments of miracles, the suffering of saints, and the arrival of glory.

The lines were precise, the composition rigorous, yet one could not find any personal traces of the creators.

Any attempt to add personal emotion here would be seen as impurities in the soul, gently and thoroughly erased.

And the air was suffused with a faint scent of pollen, not sweet, not cloying, but sharp enough to awaken the senses.

It was the Golden Feather Flowers blooming on the edge of the square.

These flowers did not sway and grow randomly; instead, they opened and closed slowly at a strange, uniform frequency.

Each opening and closing was so precise it felt unsettling, as if an invisible hand was orchestrating the entire square's rhythm.

There were no vendors' shouts on these streets, nor the sound of children playing.

A woman pushing a cradle was walking in the square.

The baby in the cradle had its eyes open, not crying, not laughing, just quietly gazing at the dome above, its pupils clear and blank.

At that moment, a series of orderly metal sounds arrived from the other end of the street.

A team of Golden Feather Knights approached.

Their footsteps were perfectly synchronized, the sound of armor clashing resembled the gears of a precise clock meshing in sync, with not a trace of excess echo.

Sunlight reflected off their bodies, bouncing off their golden full body armor, yet it appeared cold and hollow.

This armor was not worn but grown.

Through biological alchemy, consecrated metal was directly fused with the knights' flesh, bones, making the armor part of their body, unable to be removed and not requiring maintenance.

The runes on their chest plates glowed faintly, rhythmically fluctuating, simulating the rhythm of breathing.

Eduardo was at the core of the knight team, his pure white clerical robe made him appear increasingly noble against the golden armor.

The edges of the robe were embroidered with intricate golden feather patterns, the highest symbol of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court—the Secretariat of the Sacred Seat.

In Avalonia, this robe meant he had the authority to mobilize the Judicial Court, and it also meant he was one of the closest candidates to the Pope.

Within a hundred-meter radius, everyone who saw Eduardo knelt down simultaneously.

It was as if some invisible boundary had been triggered, and everyone realized at that moment they should kneel.

Commoners, priests, monks... there was no difference.

Their movements were uniform and natural, foreheads touching the ground, their backs bending into consistent arcs, even their breathing unknowingly aligned.

This wasn't like the Ironblood Empire's fear of the nobility; it was more like an obedience taken for granted.

Eduardo had long been accustomed to this.

Growing up in the Holy City, he was used to this order, where everyone's edges were smoothed, placed in their proper positions, responsible only for bearing the weight from above.

But he was also aware that this feeling was not innate.

Because he wasn't always here.

As an important executor of the Church Court, he spent most of each year dispatched to the Ironblood Empire for missions.

In the towns of the Empire, people would argue, fear, lose control over interests and hatred.

There, soldiers hesitated under orders; there, commoners trembled before power, yet also secretly raised their heads to peek.

In comparison, the kneeling in the Holy City seemed too smooth.

Every time he returned to Avalonia from the Empire, he needed some time to readjust to this obedience that required no commands.

Over time, he realized that this habitual acceptance was itself troubling; as his rank rose, that sense of unease not only didn't disappear, it became increasingly clear.

His gaze paused briefly on an elderly priest.

That face reminded him of a memory from long ago.

As a child, the archbishop who taught him the scriptures was a talkative old man who would tell anecdotes about the Old Empire, even mixing in untimely satire after class.

And now, that old man sat upright in a high-backed chair in the cardinals' hall.

Eduardo had secretly read his memories.

They contained no emotions, no personal stance, only segments of doctrinal texts repeatedly calibrated and replayed, like a human-shaped artifact polished to perfection.

At that moment, he realized for the first time that the Holy City was not a high place of faith, but a continually operating filter.

Filtering out doubt, filtering out desire, filtering out all the noise that could not be explained by divine authority.

He did not like this feeling.

Not because of fear, nor because of disdain for the order itself.

But because he always subconsciously wondered, what would these kneeling people think?

This kind of thought was not welcome in the Holy City.

Stubbornly existing in Eduardo's mind, like a thin thorn that had never been removed.

He did not hate this city, nor was he eager to destroy this system, and he understood he couldn't change it for the time being.

But deep in his heart, a grand idea was slowly taking shape.

If this system was destined not to be overthrown, perhaps it could be corrected.

And it was for this reason that the white throne, for the first time, was no longer merely a target given by his family, but a path perhaps worth embarking on.

Chapter 769:

An image of his father floated in his mind.

When he was sent to the Holy City, Duke Calvin didn't have high expectations for him, only hoping for a path that didn't rely on any Empire.

At that time, he was simply judged as having potential, so being seated on the white God Seat was not his father's initial goal.

It was only later, as his rank continued to rise, that the possibility gradually emerged, prompting his father to write to him, insisting he must strive for it.

.....

Inside the Holy Curtain Hall, three candidates stood side by side.

The dome hung high above, with platinum-colored arches extending upwards in layers, seemingly without end.

The Holy Hall itself needed no decoration to manifest its majesty; the sheer scale of the space was enough to make one instinctively hold their breath.

The grand cardinals stood in the shadows of the higher corridors, their faces hidden by hoods and light, only leaving an eerie sense of mental scrutiny.

Eduardo stood in the center, with a calm expression.

He could feel the woman on the left, known as the Forest Holy Maiden, maintaining a synchronization with the life network of the Holy Hall in an almost instinctual manner.

Her breathing, heartbeat, and even the faint spiritual flow on her skin subconsciously aligned with the Golden Feather Flower array.

On some level, she had already been partially accepted by the system.

On the other side, the presence of the adjudicator clad in a platinum robe was altogether different.

His Fighting Energy frequency was exceptionally high, causing the air to tremble slightly even though he deliberately restrained it.

It was a power repeatedly honed, existing solely for execution and judgment.

The adjudicator's gaze briefly swept over Eduardo.

There was no hostility in that gaze, but it carried a clear judgment; if this were a trial, he was confident he would be the last one standing.

The Forest Holy Maiden also sensed the presence of the two.

She did not turn her head, only tightened her fingertips slightly. A subtle change occurred in the vine patterns of the floral relief on one side of the Holy Hall.

There were no words exchanged among the three, but an invisible contest had already begun.

It was not about who was stronger but about who was more suitable.

Eduardo could feel the shifting focus from the scrutiny above, continuously comparing the three.

This was the most outstanding individual the Avalonia could produce in this era.

Also the finest candidates this system had selected for itself over the long years.

They were all geniuses, and precisely because of that, they stood here, as candidates.

At this moment, the grand cardinal walked slowly to the four candidates.

His skin was so pale it was nearly translucent, as if detached from sunlight for a long time, with blood vessels faintly visible beneath, like silk threads soaked in water.

With each step he took, the embedded reliefs of the Golden Feather Flower on the floor would tremble lightly.

The sound spread along the stone lines, permeating the entire floor of the Holy Curtain Hall, making one's bones resonate.

The grand cardinal stopped before the three.

He opened his withered fingers, raising a Holy Order forged from gold leaf from his sleeve: "According to the first volume of the Avalonnia Code, the will of the anointed cannot be directly viewed, the transmission of divine cannot be desecrated."

His pace of speech was steady and emotionless, as if reciting a manual memorized thousands of times.

"In the next twenty cycles of day and night, you will enter into eternal tranquility with the current Holy Seat."

As this sentence fell, a barely audible echo came from deep within the dome of the Holy Curtain Hall.

It was not an echo but more like a slow confirmation.

The grand cardinal slightly raised his chin, scanning over the four individuals.

"These twenty days are not a waiting period. Your consciousness will collide with the crown at a high frequency.

Those who endure are divine; those who do not are dust."

The Holy Order closed slowly, and the ritual commenced.

Twelve cardinals emerged from both sides of the Holy Hall, forming two lines, retreating backward while maintaining their gaze on the throne.

The distance, speed, and angle of each step were disturbingly precise.

Their faces bore the same expression.

Neither joy nor piety but a serenity calibrated over long periods.

As if confirming that a certain process had finally entered the planned phase.

When the last cardinal exited the Holy Hall, the massive stone doors began to close slowly.

The turning door hinges emitted a heavy and prolonged rumbling sound.

The massive white stone door, weighing tens of thousands of tons, closed bit by bit, with runes densely covering it gradually lighting up, forming flowing chains of light that completely isolated the last ray of natural light.

Only four remained inside the door.

On the white throne, the current Pope sat.

His body was suspended by countless golden threads, like a finely manipulated puppet.

The threads extended into the shadowy depths of the dome, with no visible source.

When he spoke, the sound did not emerge from a single throat.

It was an overlapping whisper, as if thousands simultaneously sighed by the ear: "Come... who can share this... vast love?"

Eduardo's right palm suddenly throbbed with stabbing pain.

As if an alarm intentionally buried within his soul was forcibly triggered at that moment.

The Divine Grace was screaming.

Escape.

Escape immediately.

The ability of memory reading went out of control under this stimulus.

It was not that Eduardo actively sought to observe, but that everything around him offered itself to him.

In that instant, his vision was forcibly torn apart, with the surface structure of the Holy Hall peeled away like a fragile shell, becoming transparent.

The towering white stone pillars reaching into the dome ceased to be a load-bearing structure.

Chapter 770:

Inside the column, there was no stone at all.

It was a scene that made one sick.

Countless golden nerve fibers densely filled the entire stone column, intertwining and writhing, their surfaces covered with a translucent spiritual membrane, akin to blood vessels not yet fully formed.

These fibers were not still; they pulsed.

With a steady yet cold rhythm, contracting and expanding, as if the entire Holy Hall itself was breathing.

Eduardo saw these fibers extending in all directions.

But all their endpoints eventually followed the thick main lines under the floor, converging towards a singular core.

The white throne, atop the thorn-patterned feather crown.

Wings like thorns opened and closed at an extremely slow pace, as if adjusting their breath or waiting for some appropriate signal.

Every weak pulse would trigger a synchronized tremor in the internal neural network of the Holy Hall.

Eduardo could not comprehend the significance of this structure's existence.

It lacked religious symbolism and did not adhere to any known alchemy logic.

This was a massive organ, fully debugged and long maintained in a standby state.

And now it was assessing the nodes that could be accessed one by one.

The air inside the Holy Hall began to descend.

Not flowing, but dropping.

As if the entire space was being compressed inward by some invisible weight, even the light was dragged down towards the ground.

Breathing became difficult, the edges of thoughts began to lag, time lost its linear progression, leaving only a forcibly elongated, constantly repeated stillness.

The forest Holy Maiden Sylvie was the first to succumb.

Her breath unknowingly synchronized completely with the rhythm of the Holy Hall.

The spiritual fluctuations on her skin were smoothed and diminished layer by layer until they approached zero.

Her pupils slowly dilated, her gaze lost focus.

Yet there was no pain on her face.

It was a kind of almost satisfied daze, as if she had finally found the right place and was permitted to merge into a greater whole.

Her body leaned slightly forward, as if listening to some call only she could hear.

In the next moment, her heartbeat stopped.

There was no violent twitch nor scream, her body lost its support and quietly fell to the cold ground, without even a trace of echo.

Gabriel, the arbiter, stepped forward almost simultaneously.

His sacred Fighting Energy erupted fiercely under instinctive urging, platinum light bursting from the cracks in his armor.

However, before that power could spread, it was rudely suppressed by a higher-order existence.

As if his rebellion was not considered a "processable event" from the beginning.

Gabriel's face showed intense fluctuations for the first time.

It was not fear, but a complete collapse of recognition.

His Fighting Energy, his faith, everything he relied on to define himself was proven meaningless at this moment.

He opened his mouth, seemingly wanting to say something.

In the next second, his pupils suddenly contracted.

A golden nerve fiber broke through from beneath the floor and pierced into his chest like a venomous snake.

No blood splashed, the fiber completed synchronization with the sacred Fighting Energy as soon as it entered his body.

Gabriel's body stiffened for a moment.

Then, like a shell drained of its contents, he slowly collapsed to the ground.

Two bodies.

Quietly lying beneath the steps of the Holy Hall.

No one announced their failure.

Nor was there a need.

Eduardo stood still, having not moved from the start.

The palm of his right hand was no longer just a simple stabbing pain.

The golden pattern symbolizing Divine Grace had completely lost control, its color rapidly deepening and reddening, as if a heated branding iron was directly seared onto his soul. The intense burning pain spread along his nerves, rushing straight into the depths of his consciousness.

It was a pain at the soul level.

It was forcibly issuing him a final command.

Flee.